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The iSPER Brexit Series

PAPER II:

The potential impact of Brexit on our national security and defence

Dr G H Bennett

James Smith

ABOUT THE iSPER BREXIT SERIES

Since the British public voted to leave the European Union, there has been widespread conjecture as governments across Europe and beyond try to assess the political and social ramifications of the result. There is no question that Brexit has the potential to impact on all aspects of our day-to-day lives, from education to the economy, health and housing, trade and travel, and much more besides.

As such, policy makers face a number of challenges in light of the increased responsibility placed on them – as areas of legislation previously under EU competence may soon be decided nationally – at the same time as preserving our global position, links and security.

In a new project led by the Institute for Social, Policy and Enterprise Research (iSPER) at the University of Plymouth, leading academics across a range of fields will attempt to shed light on how the referendum result might affect their areas of expertise.

If you would like any more information about The iSPER Brexit Series, or any of the academics involved, please email isper@plymouth.ac.uk

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL, POLICY AND ENTERPRISE RESEARCH (iSPER)

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1. Summary

Defence and national security are two particularly pressing areas of debate given the Brexit vote, the evolution of Russian policy, uncertainties arising from the election of a new administration in the United States, the threat of terrorism and the findings of the Chilcot inquiry. The emerging threat to NATO is one which cannot be viewed with but the greatest concern even as the United Kingdom heads towards the exit door of the European Union. While the UK will continue to retain links with Europe, and must play a full role in reinforcing NATO and the principles of European defence, its vital national interests will, in a post-Brexit world, extend around the globe from Asia to Africa to South America and beyond along the trade networks. In a post-Brexit future, any threat to the world trading networks on which the British economy will increasingly rely is a threat to national security.

The UK has to enhance the capabilities of its armed forces and defence industry, and should seek to do so in a short timescale. In light of the fact that naval power can most effectively and unobtrusively police and defend Britain's post-Brexit trading links, the Royal Navy should be a particular focus. Meanwhile the removal of EU laws on competition and state subsidy mean the UK has an opportunity to invest in key industries which support defence including shipbuilding, aerospace, steel and electronics. Finally, it will be important to ensure, in light of the Russian threat and the findings of the Chilcot inquiry, that reform of the Ministry of Defence itself is undertaken, including a greater degree of separation between government and the military alongside increased liaison between service chiefs and parliament. It is clear that critical UK military capabilities were sacrificed in the period 2010 to 2015 which now leave UK defences highly vulnerable.

2. Purpose of Paper

This paper should be read in conjunction with another paper within the iSPER Brexit series, also written by Dr Harry Bennett. That paper outlines a set of unknown issues, continuities and possible outcomes (UK and EU) from the Brexit vote which form the context for the short, medium and long term requirements of Britain's defence needs. A further backdrop to the production of this paper is provided by the publication of the report of the Chilcot inquiry on 6 July 2016, which examined the UK's preparations for the war in Iraq in 2003, and the subsequent handling of operations.

3. The International Position

The outlook for international affairs is increasingly unstable as a result of:

- Continued global financial and political instability;
- Question marks over the future of the European Union;
- Question marks over Britain's relationship with the EU and the states of Europe;
- Instability in the Middle East and impacts beyond the region as a result of terrorism, the price of oil and migration flows;

- Environmental problems/global warming impacting on the stability of states/state failure;
- The danger of state-on-state clashes/full hostilities involving Russia, China and other powers;
- The military weakness of Europe collectively and individually;
- The current trend of the decline of British and American power and political influence;
- The consequent decline of the military power of NATO and question marks over American policy thereto;
- The rise of cyber, drone and hybrid warfare;
- Continued threats of WMD proliferation and employment by states, organised crime and/or terrorists.

4. The UK's Position

When framing defence policy after leaving the EU the British Government can make use of existing attributes and opportunities but it also faces a number of key challenges:

- *On the one hand* existing defence and security arrangements, especially the UK's place in NATO and seat on the UN Security Council, remain in place. *On the other hand*, in the eyes of some powers, Brexit raises question marks over the UK's ability to continue its former role in international affairs and question marks over future American policy towards NATO and UN raise questions over the future of those organisations;
- *On the one hand* it is apparent that the trading arrangements which Britain is forced to pursue in the light of Brexit will require a world-wide role to project and defend Britain's interests. *On the other hand* the short and medium term financial fallout from Brexit may increase pressure on the public finances leading to pressure for cuts in defence and other areas of government expenditure;
- *On the one hand* the British public continues to maintain considerable levels of support for its armed forces. *On the other hand* the political realities are that maintaining spending on the NHS, and some areas of social security spending (universal pensioner benefits, foreign aid and other soft power) has received a higher priority than UK defence since the Strategic Defence and Security Review 2010 (SDSR2010);
- *On the one hand* the UK government wants Britain's armed forces to play a global role, and rhetorically invests great faith in their ability and professionalism. *On the other hand*, the Chilcot inquiry has demonstrated 'wholly inadequate' planning, preparation and resourcing of the campaign in Iraq which began in 2003 (even before the cuts of SDSR2010). That report also notes that the campaign in Iraq ended 'a very long way from success'.

5. Essential Requirements for UK Defence and Strategy

- The UK must act to bolster its membership of the UN Security Council;

- The UK must act to bolster NATO and the existing security framework;
- The UK must increase spending on the military (in real terms rather than as a percentage share of UK GDP), as the means to: increase Britain's defence in a time of growing international tensions; bolster its role in NATO and the UN; cope with unexpected/emergencies; and as an important symbol of Britain's pursuit of global trade, and the role and responsibilities that go with it;
- The UK must act strategically, multilaterally and unilaterally to preserve peace and international law while assisting defence and related industries to preserve capacity, and to ensure important economic and political spin offs.
- In a world where post-Brexit trading relationships calls for Britain to play a world role, and where the policies of the Trump administration may see a focus on what might be described as "America First", Britain must be ready to lead the world on some critical issues, and in facing up to the strategic and other challenges of the 21st Century. This is no idle piece of patriotic sloganeering or empty rhetoric. Brexit forces Britain to enhance her role in the world, and the nature of the Anglo-American relationship looks likely to change under the Trump administration.

6. The Need to Reshape UK Defence

UK defence and security policy now require urgent readjustment to take into account changed and changing realities:

- In the short term there is an urgent need to address critical weaknesses in National Defence which can be offset by increasing personnel levels, placing immediate orders for equipment, upgrading existing equipment, and expediting the entry into service of units such as the Boeing P-8 maritime surveillance aircraft.
- In the short to medium term, to play a global role, instead of that of a power with a regional focus, Britain requires the means to make its presence felt along the trading networks on which the nation's prosperity depends. In a time of growing threats, Britain's vital national interests will, in a post-Brexit world, extend around the globe from Asia to Africa to South America and beyond. Security and defence co-operation needs to underpin trading links, and the UK needs to work with existing partners, to re-forge historic links with Commonwealth partners, and to found new relationships with emergent powers;
- The sea is the principal highway on which imports and exports to and from Britain will depend. The sea contains vital natural resources, and is an absolutely critical element in the natural environment of the world. Protection of the biosphere is essential for the future of the human race. The importance of the sea cannot be overstated, and it is naval power which can most effectively and unobtrusively police and defend it. With its inherent flexibility, and without the need for costly and awkward basing, or overflying rights, sea power can provide the cost effective means to defend Britain's interests. UK defence policy should rest on key capabilities for the Armed Forces to provide UK home defence, in particular the ability of the Royal Navy to defend British territorial waters, to defend Britain's global trading network and to police and, if need be, to project combat power

(carrier-based airpower, amphibious operations, expeditionary force) over large parts of the earth's surface;

- The removal of EU laws on competition and state subsidy mean that the UK has an opportunity to invest in key industries which support defence including shipbuilding, aerospace, steel and electronics, which can additionally help to boost the UK STEM industries, boost jobs and play a role in regional redevelopment and national cohesion. Investment and research and development in defence industries can spill over into the private sector shipbuilding/shipping/aerospace/manufacturing industries with the growth of world transport already established as one of the features of the 21st Century. The search for efficiencies in the military sphere can support greener transport options in the civilian sector.
- Investing in UK defence industries can also spur important new partnerships. These partnerships can be between states, and between companies, in the way that the European project was underpinned by partnerships in aviation (Tornado, Typhoon). Within the UK those partnerships, and the need to defend the whole of the British Isles (no matter what the internal constitutional arrangements), can also provide a focus for efforts to renegotiate the relationships between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. To these ends the UK Government should embrace the spirit and much of the detail of Sir John Parker's 2016 'Independent Report to Inform the UK National Shipbuilding Strategy' (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-national-shipbuilding-strategy-an-independent-report>);
- The Chilcot Inquiry demonstrates that the Ministry of Defence, and the relationship between politicians and the military is not fit for purpose. The Ministry of Defence now serves, in part, as a means for the Treasury to control spending on the military. At the same time service chiefs have been prevented by the politicians from speaking out, or making any comment which might challenge some of the points in 3 (above). The maintenance of an effective and strategically defence policy calls for:
 - a. A greater degree of separation between the military and politicians, with the former having sufficient authority to stand up to undue political pressure.
 - b. Greater liaison between the service chiefs and Parliament to ensure that UK defence needs are better understood beyond the immediate confines of the government.
 - c. A complete overhaul of the Ministry of Defence, its methods and culture, including the higher organisation of defence, approach to strategic-led planning and service education by historical analysis (in particular an abandonment of the idea that "just in time logistics" favoured by industry is appropriate to the military environment).

7. Key Sources

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Dr G H (Harry) Bennett is Associate Professor of History at the University of Plymouth where he has taught international history for 24 years. Author of over 20 books, his research has focussed on diplomatic, military and political history in the mid-twentieth century. His latest book 'The Royal Navy in the Age of Austerity 1919-22: Naval and Foreign Policy under Lloyd George' is published by Bloomsbury.

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